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THE ERASMUS MUNDUS PROGRAMME AS A VEHICLE FOR DEVELOPMENT



This article analyses the Erasmus Mundus programme run by the European Commission in terms of structured cooperation between the EU and third country universities. Special attention is paid to the implementation of Erasmus Mundus projects aimed at environmental protection, biodiversity conservation, reduction in the use of hazardous substances, and the improvement of the attractiveness of the region.

Key words: Erasmus Mundus, higher education, Baltic Sea region, environmental protection.

In 1996 the OECD proposed a set of concrete development objectives and encouraged global development partnership in order to achieve them. The Millennium Development Goals include, among others, the issues of the environmental sustainability and global partnership for development [1]. The European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea Region of June 10th, 2009, aims at the promotion of a more balanced development of the Region with the four cornerstones: to make the Baltic Region environmentally sustainable, prosperous, accessible and attractive, and, finally, safe and secure. The fifteen priority areas include: to reduce nutrient inputs to the sea to acceptable levels, to preserve natural zones and biodiversity, to reduce the use and impact of hazardous substances, to become a model region for clean shipping, to mitigate and adapt to climate change, to remove hindrances to the internal market in the Baltic Sea Region, to exploit the full potential of the region in research and innovation, to promote entrepreneurship, to reinforce sustainability of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, to improve the access to, and the efficiency and security of the energy markets, to improve internal and external transport links, to maintain and reinforce attractiveness of the Baltic Sea Region in particular through education and youth, tourism, culture and health, to become a leading region in maritime safety and security, to reinforce maritime accident response capacity protection from major emergencies, to decrease the volume of, and harm done by, cross border crime [2]. As we can see, the environment was selected as the action plan's key pillar, which is caused by the vulnerable state of the Baltic Sea [3]. The Baltic Sea Programme 2009—2013 proposes strategies that are connected with the overall EU policy priorities. For example, Lisbon strategy focuses on growth and jobs, while Gothenburg strategy sets the directions towards sustainable economical development. Their overall aim is to make Europe more competitive on the global scene so that it could become a world leader in innovation, on the basis of the same principles: economy, society and environment [4]. They also suggest more investment in education and research as a vehicle for the realization of goals. Consequently, the universities should promote

student and staff mobility, establish joint curricula and programs, strengthen cooperation, exchange people and thoughts.

The European Commission programme Erasmus Mundus, operated by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), is built on similar premises: its overall aim is to enhance the quality of higher education and promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through mobility and academic cooperation. The program is focused on enhancing cooperation with so called third countries that is outside the European Union. It provides support to higher education institutions, individual students, researchers and university staff, as well as organizations active in the field of higher education. Its objectives include: the enhancement of quality in European higher education, the promotion of the EU as a centre of excellence in learning around the world, the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries as well as for the development of third countries in the field of higher education. The program is being implemented through the following actions: joint programmes at masters and doctoral levels, Erasmus Mundus partnerships between European and third country higher education institutions, including scholarships and fellowships for mobility at all academic levels, promotion of European higher education and enhancement of the attractiveness of Europe as an educational destination and a centre of excellence at world level [5]. They are called Action 1, Action 2, and Action 3 respectively. No wonder, a number of the Baltic Sea region universities eagerly participates in the program and thus, achieves goals that are in line with the regional strategies. When we look at the list of the EU partners forming Erasmus Mundus consortia, we will find universities from Sweden, Germany, Finland, Poland, Lithuania. Some of them are project coordinators that successfully lead subsequent editions of the same and new Erasmus Mundus projects. There are Russian universities involved in Erasmus Mundus, too, but they certainly belong to the group of non-EU partners.

As mentioned before, Erasmus Mundus programme promotes structured cooperation between the EU and third countries higher education institutions, based on win-win solutions aiming at the increase of the impact of EU higher education in third countries' sustainable development. This means that pressure is placed on linking the projects with real problems of a given region and its development. Therefore, many Erasmus Mundus projects focus on specific areas of study or skills. For example, Erasmus Mundus lot 11, Asia, assumed the following aims: "to contribute to the mutual enrichment of societies by developing the qualifications of men and woman so that they possess appropriate skills, particularly as regards the labour market, and are open-minded and internationally experienced; to promote mobility both for students, researchers and academics from third countries, especially from vulnerable groups, selected on the basis of academic excellence, to obtain qualifications and/or experience in the European Union; to contribute towards the development of human resources and the international co-operation capacity of higher education institutions in third countries through increased mobility streams between the European Union and third countries in

accordance with the principles of equal opportunities and non-discrimination” [7]. The prioritized fields of study include: Environmental Issues, Public Health, Social Welfare, and International Law/Human Rights. Other 11 projects make an effort to address the demands of the local labour markets and put stress on the development of the entrepreneurship spirit among students in such countries as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan. Another instance is a project that focuses on health, environment and biodiversity. One of the projects with Western Balkans promotes science and technology as vehicles for a faster economic development of the region and its inclusion in the European economy. There are many more examples that prove that Erasmus Mundus outcomes are envisioned as to go far beyond education and research in partner universities during the lifecycles of the specific projects. If we look at Bray and Thomas’ framework for comparative education analyses in the form of a cube, we can observe that Erasmus Mundus is equally successful on micro and macro level [8, p. 23]. To be more specific, the programme goes from the individuals to the world regions; from curricula to some other aspects, like teaching methods, internationalization at the higher education institutions, educational finance, and, maybe in the future, labour markets and other aspects that are crucial for the region; through different demographic groups, including the most vulnerable that are defined as Target Group III candidates. As Phillips and Schweistfurth observe in their book on comparative and international education, there is a strong relation between education and national development, no matter whether we apply human capital, modernization, liberation, conscientization, correspondence, reproduction or perpetration theory. To quote the authors, “education is perceived as a key social institution that can affect the values and behaviours of individuals, shaping the citizens and workforce of the future, and therefore impacting on national development” [8, p. 69]. As we can see, on the long run, such programmes as Erasmus Mundus help to implement new policies and strategies connected with the issues that the region faces. Therefore we can say Erasmus Mundus helps the EU partners to prepare their educational offer to be more global and region oriented and, consequently, contribute to the region’s development. Environmental issues are definitely part of this and the Baltic Sea universities that participate in the programme actively help to solve the issues that their country and the Baltic Sea region struggle with.

We can clearly observe that Erasmus Mundus is equally beneficial for the third countries and the EU partners. It is a mutual exchange of educational programmes, skills and expertise; it provides a unique opportunity to initiate mutual inter-cultural dialogue and attain mutual understanding that is a prologue for future joint activities; it is designed as to achieve sustainability of the outcomes; the students, academic and administrative staff acquire precious skills that are required by the 21st century world; it diversifies the sources of funding and generates new initiatives, to mention a few of the obvious advantages. It seems that the most important of them is the exchange and building of skills that are necessary if the universities are to become more and more internationalized and responsive to the issues that need to be re-

solved on the local and global level. It is closely connected with the 21st century skills that can be defined in short as those that include strong academic skills, thinking, reasoning, teamwork skills, and proficiency in using technology in the global environment [6]. Sense of control over one's destiny, motivation to work for success, acceptance of diversity and change, universalism, are, among others, considered to be modern values, as defined by McLelland and Inkeles and Smith [8, p. 71]. Such skills and values help to face environmental issues both on the regional and global scale.

Apart from the obvious opportunities Erasmus Mundus provides to the individuals and institutions, there are some challenges that the stakeholders need to cope with. We can list here difficulties with the recognition and transfer of grades and credit points earned abroad; in some cases, lowering the quality instead of increasing it; inadequate number of applications in relation to the number of scholarships available, and thus, overwhelming work for the departments; internationalization at the cost of regional and country interests; in some cases, elitism and limited access to the programme. What is the most important, however, Erasmus Mundus partners need to offer adequate educational programmes in English and facilities to be able to host the scholarship holders. It takes close cooperation with the departments and faculty that are to accept students and academic staff from the partner universities. It is especially important in the case of projects that are specialized in specific fields or are designed so as to focus on a number of prioritized disciplines. Usually such projects do not exclude other disciplines, because it is not always possible to select high quality applications in the prioritized fields only. From our university experience, there were projects in which only 10% of the scholarships were granted within the prioritized fields. Should we consider it as a failure? On the one hand, yes, but on the other hand, Erasmus Mundus programme is a great tool to assess what the universities need to improve in order to meet the needs of the contemporary world. If each partner could make a report on their educational offer and analyze what their strengths and weaknesses are, what their opportunities and threats could be, it would be a great help for setting goals and streamlining educational policies in a given institution. For example, all of the Baltic Sea region universities that participate in Erasmus Mundus offer environmental studies. However, they should ask themselves the question whether these programmes are ready to accept international students, whether these students can graduate, and whether there are adequate research groups to accommodate faculty from the third countries with their interests, concerns and needs. Only then can Erasmus Mundus serve the partner universities in the way it is designed to and bring the long-term outcomes the partners look forward to.

To sum up, Erasmus Mundus programme is closely interrelated with the regional and global strategies for development and sustainability. Therefore, the Baltic Sea region universities that participate in it face a great opportunity to contribute to the future of the region. Environmental issue is the key pillar of these strategies, as well as a priority field for Erasmus Mundus pro-

jects. Thus, Erasmus Mundus partner universities should cooperate in this field and ensure adequate educational programmes in Environmental Studies, conducted in English, so that they could facilitate students and academic staff — Erasmus Mundus scholarship holders — and, on the long run, ensure sustainability of the project works. International and intercultural dialogue is the crux here. Following Kenneth King's theory, the main changes to international development cooperation include, among others, "global sustainability and development targets for both north and south, with a growing awareness of global responsibilities of all nations [8, p. 76]." As Julius Nyerere concludes, "Education has to increase men's physical and mental freedom to increase their control over themselves, their own lives, the environment in which they live [8, p. 60]."

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